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FEDERAL LANDS HIGHWAY ASSISTANCE TO RUSSIA

Information provided by Mick Matzke, Highway Engineer, Eastern Division, (703) 285-0054

Interview conducted by Kristi Swisher, Editor

Mick Matzke recently completed a 30-day detail finalizing the alignment for the Beartooth Highway for the Western Federal Lands Highway Division (WFLHD), in Vancouver, Washington. Mick did an outstanding job on the project, and his work was much-needed and appreciated. Before Mick left for his home in Sterling, I asked him to star in this month's newsletter by reporting on his involvement with a team of Russian engineers in an attempt to transfer highway technology to Moscow. Mick kindly agreed, and provided the information for this article.

Before describing his most recent Russian experience, Mick provided me with some background on the connections Federal Lands has had with Russia over the years. In 1993, the Russians needed help with road rehabilitation projects in Moscow. The Russians secured a loan from the World Bank and requested assistance from the Federal Highway Administration to develop plans for each project. A team of engineers from the Eastern Division Office was sent to Russia in December of 1993. Eastern conducted pavement condition surveys in Moscow and brought back the survey results to the Sterling office in March of 1994. Tom Hildreth from the Western Federal Lands Division was involved in developing the specifications for the surveys, and Emory Richardson, also from Western, handled materials.



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An eight-member team comprised of four Americans and four Russians met in Sterling, VA at the Eastern office later that same year. Mick was one of the Americans on the team. Although there were officially only eight team members, many other Americans at the Eastern office provided technical and clerical support for the project.

The team developed plans for nine separate contracts in two languages. The computers used to develop the plans had stickers on the letters of the keyboard symbolizing Russian letters. The Russians wrote down what they wanted to say and the Americans would hunt and peck for the appropriate letters on the keyboard. The Russians would then proof-read the results for accuracy and to ensure that nothing was lost in translation. The Russians had no real Computer Assisted Drafting and Design (CADD) experience, so the American team members performed the CADD work.

Communication was often challenging. One team member from Eastern understood Russian and two of the Russian team members were somewhat familiar with English. Still, Mick says, “It made for interesting conversation.”

The Russians remained at Eastern for one month and then took the contract plans back to Moscow. Contract work began in November and December of 1993 and was completed in March of 1994. The contracts were advertised with the aid of Federal Lands employees who journeyed to Moscow and stayed for 3-4 months during construction. Tom Hildreth was again involved with specifications for these contracts.

After the plans were completed, Mick and the other American team members, as well as a few folks from the nearby international office, took a 16-week, Russian language course. Mick said the Russian language utilizes a few of the same letters as the English language does, but most of the symbols were new. Mick said the course helped him learn the basics and made communication a little easier for future meetings.

The following year in 1995, another team of Russians from the Federal Highway Department (as the Russian highway system is called) came to Eastern. The team members were different than the ones who had journeyed together to America in 1993 (the team members in 1993 were consultant-type Russians, and the team in 1995 was formed directly from members of the Russian highway system). During their stay, the Russian team observed the American computer and CADD systems and were intrigued with the Engineer’s Estimate System (EES). This is the same system in use at WFLHD. The Russians wanted to know how difficult it would be to acquire and use the program in Russia. Dan Van Gilder, Computer Coordinator at Eastern, developed a plan to implement a working version of EES into the Russian system. Mick and Dan took the EES plan to Russia last October, and stayed for two weeks in Moscow in an attempt to install the program and show the Russians how to use it.

Unfortunately however, the Russians were not ready for a program that was so dependent on a bidding system, since the Russian bidding system is almost non-existent. In fact, the nine contracts developed in 1993 represent almost the only bid system in Russia’s history. Since the

EES program requires the use of historic bid data to run properly, the program was not useful to Russia based on their past operating methods. Several other factors, such as incredibly high inflation, widely variable unit prices for materials from one area of the country to another, and the newness of the concept, made it too difficult for implementation of the EES to occur.

Dan and Mick recognized that it was pointless to proceed further, and advised the Russians that when they were ready, they should develop their own EES system, based on the particulars of their highway program. Dan and Mick provided guidance on how to prepare for an EES system, and suggested asking the Highway Industry to develop standard pay items and a Federal Procurement Manual. Pay items and standards were foreign concepts to the Russians, as the Russians operate their highway program much differently than Americans do. The Russian Highway Department funds eight different categories of road improvements (such as road prism, pavement, intersection, etc.). The Russians set basic prices for these eight items but don't develop plans for any of them. For each section of the country there are different prices for each of the materials needed and special price indexes are applied. The prices are set and do not waiver. Road building in Russia does not require environmental or cultural clearances. An interesting sidenote is that there has been an advisor representing the Federal Highway Administration stationed in Moscow full-time for the past 5-6 years.

In addition to what Mick learned about the Russian highway program, he also made many other interesting observations in Moscow. Mick stayed in the hotel that was built for the Olympic Games and found the accommodations to be very comfortable. Moscow is an expensive city to visit, and Mick said that although some of the buildings and streets were in need of repair, the streets were clean and there was no graffiti. For the most part, people on the streets were well-dressed, and Mick said he felt safe walking in the city at night. The form of currency in Russia is the ruble, and at the time of Mick's visit, one American dollar was worth 5500 rubles. Mick saw more open markets than American-type grocery stores and there were numerous streetside fruit stands or kiosks that served exceptional-looking produce. There were many American-made cars on the streets, but lots of BMW's and Mercedes as well. Vehicles had the right-of-way in the streets, but there were shop-lined tunnels available for pedestrians to cross under safely. The McDonald's restaurants in Moscow were huge, 2-story structures and quite fancy-looking compared to their American counterparts. The line of waiting customers extended outdoors during meal times. A cheeseburger, fries and coke cost about five American dollars.

Would Mick go back to Russia again? "Absolutely," he says "although if I went back, I'd like to be able to speak the language better." We at Federal Lands would like to say "CpACNbA" Mick, for representing our agency so well.



ROAD SIGNS

It's not so much how busy you are, but why you are busy. The bee is praised, the mosquito is swatted.

- Marie O'Conner

Please send all submissions to Kristi Swisher - (360.696.7572). Be sure your name, title, and phone number are the way you want them to appear in the article. Articles are subject to editor/layout approval and may be condensed if space is limited.

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